

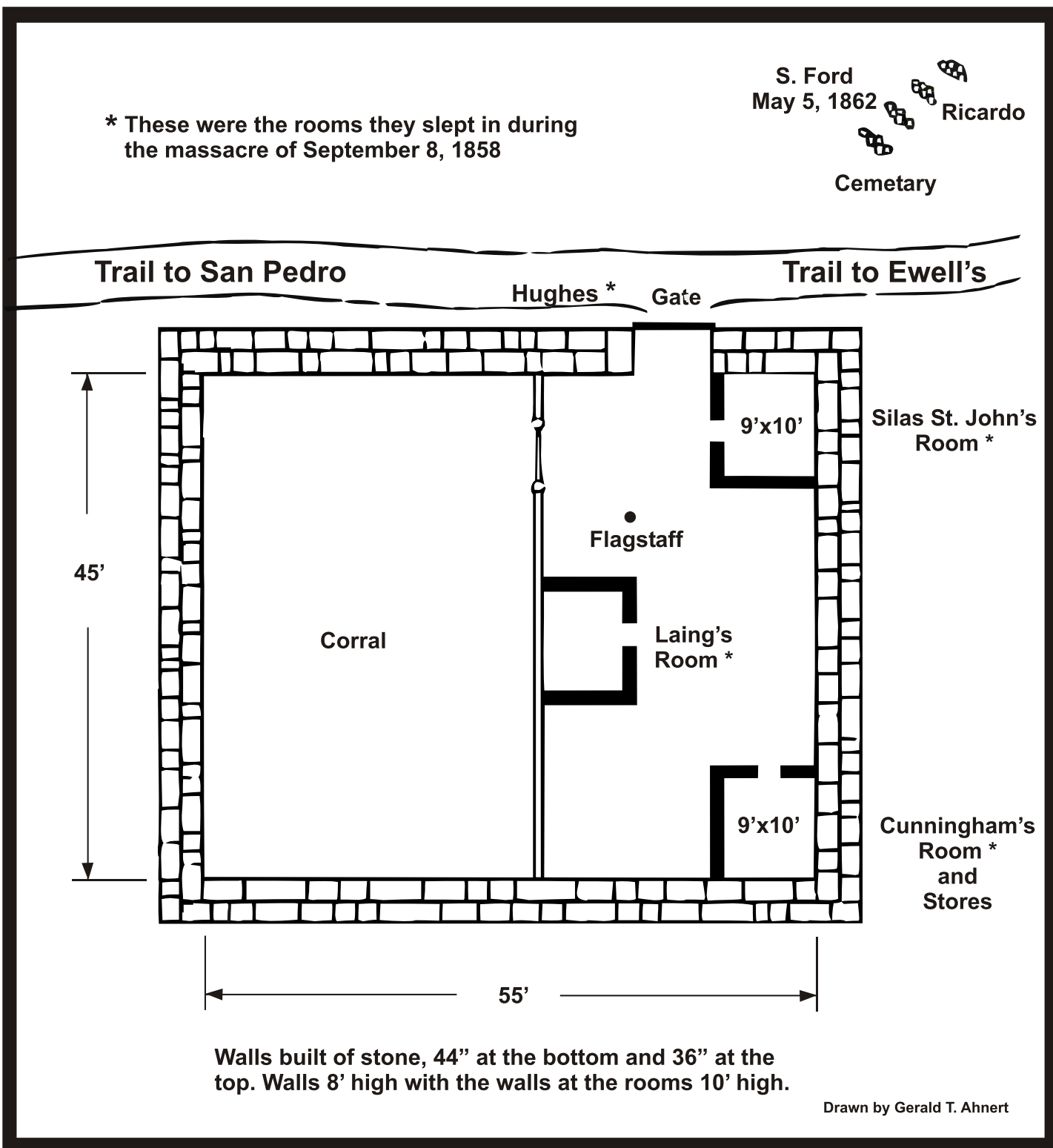
The Massacre at Dragoon Station

September 8, 1858

In August, 1858, under the superintendency of William Buckley of Watertown, New York, Frank de Ruyther, William Brainard, Silas St. John and others, located the line and built the stations between the Rio Grande and Tucson. At Dragoon Springs, a corral of stone, 45x55 feet, was erected. It was constructed especially strong, as this was a passing point for the Apaches going to and coming from Sonora. The walls and gates were completed before the construction corps moved on westwardly to San Pedro, St. John remaining with six assistants to complete the structure, roofing the store-room and residence portion, etc. The assistants were James Hughes of Watertown, New York, the line blacksmith, James Laing and William Cunningham, before noted, and three Mexicans, laborers, Guadalupe and Pablo Ramirez, alias Chino, of Sonora, and Bonifacio Mirando, of Chihuahua. On the night of Wednesday, September 8th, it was clear starlight but no moon. At midnight, St. John was up changing the guard. Laing having stood the first portion of the night, Guadalupe was given the turn until daylight. The other two Mexicans slept outside the walls, as also did Mr. Hughes, who preferred not to remain inside where too many animals were stabled. St. John slept in the room at the northeast corner next the gateway, Laing in the center room, while Cunningham occupied the room in the south corner, where the stores were kept. About one o'clock A. M., St. John was partially aroused by an unusual stir among the stock. He heard a low whistle sounded, apparently as a signal, and simultaneously there was the sound of blows and a feeble outcry from the victims on either side of him. St. John sprang to his feet from the pallet upon the ground to be confronted by the three Mexicans, Guadalupe armed with a broad axe, Bonifacio with a chopping axe, and Pablo, alias Chino, with a stone sledge, all striking at him a well directed kick disposed of Chino, the glint of the axe wielded by Bonifacio directed toward St. John's head, shown by the starlight, enabled him to parry the blow with his right hand, which threw the axe-blade into his hip, while a straight from the shoulder blow landed in Bonifacio's face, knocked him out. Guadalupe was at St. John's left striking viciously with the short handled broad axe. The first stroke was caught in parrying by the palm of his hand, the next upon the forearm below the elbow. As St. John reached for his Spark's rifle, which was standing against the wall at the head of his bed, Guadalupe got in a successful stroke which severed St. John's arm midway between elbow and shoulder. Bringing the rifle into play, he knocked the axe from Guadalupe's hands, and the other two having gained their feet, all three made their escape through the gateway. The action lasted from ten to twenty seconds. As St. John's left arm was disabled, the bone being severed, he dropped the rifle and reached for his pistol from the holster on his saddle, which he was using as a pillow. The Mexicans, hearing the gun drop, attempted to re-enter the corral, when St. John fired one shot, upon which they decamped. Owing to the wound in his hip, St. John's right hip was disabled so that he could not follow outside for further shots. St. John bound up his wounds as well as he could, climbed to the top of some sacks of barley where he could command a view over the walls, and, pistol in hand, waited for daylight. Two of his companions not being killed outright, were moaning deeply. When light enough to see St. John got down from his perch, and went to Cunningham, who had three cuts on his head, evidently inflicted by Guadalupe with the broad axe—he was unconscious, but occasionally groaning. Laing had one wound immediately on the top of his head, severing the skull in twain, from which the brain was protruding. He was alive and partly conscious, as he made attempts to rise. Bonifacio evidently inflicted the wound with the chopping axe. St. John crept outside to where Hughes was lying, and found his head completely crushed by a blow from the stone sledge. His death was instantaneous. St. John found that moving about caused the blood to flow freely from his wounds. He made a tourniquet with a handkerchief, stone and stick, which stopped the flow of blood from his left arm, but the wound in his hip, being full width of the axe-blade, was more difficult to control, but by keeping still the blood coagulated and stopped the hemorrhage. All day Thursday, he lay there enduring the groans of his companions whom he was powerless to aid. It was very hot during the day, no water in the corral; he was feverish from his wounds, and suffered much from thirst. Thursday night the coyotes were attracted by the smell of the wounds, and their barking and howling made a pandemonium, which was added to by the braying of the hungry mules. About midnight, St. John heard the death rattle in Cunningham's throat. Friday dawned; with light came flocks of buzzards, crows and magpies, who alighted on the walls and rafters—the roof was not on yet. St. John, waving his arm, kept them from coming into the corral. They, however, mutilated the face of Hughes who lay outside. This night was also made hideous by the starving animals, and increased number of wolves, who appeared to be fighting among themselves. When they came to the gate, St. John fired on them with his revolver, which kept them at bay. With daylight Saturday morning, they left, but the buzzards returned. This, the third day, seemed to St. John almost interminable, while his thirst was torturing. Laing was yet alive, moaning feebly, but not attempting to move. This night, the wolves were more bold and attacked Hughes body, fighting and quarrelling over it not more than ten feet from where St. John lay. An occasional pistol shot kept them from entering the enclosure. With Sunday morning came relief. Mr. Archibald, correspondent for the Memphis Avalanche, arrived from Tucson on his way to the Rio Grande. Seeing no flag flying and no one moving about the station, he halted a half mile distant, leaving his horse with his companion, and approached with his gun cocked. St. John could not respond to his halloas as his tongue and throat were disabled from thirst. Archibald at once started for the spring, a mile distant up the canyon. He had no sooner left than three wagons of the Leach road party approached from the East. They, too, seeing no life about the station, left the road and made a detour about half a mile to the south—fearing an ambush. Then they cautiously approached the corral on foot. In the party were Col. James B. Leach, Major N. H. Hutton and same other veterans, who quickly dressed St. John's wounds, which were full of maggots. They buried the bodies of Hughes and Cunningham in one grave. Laing still hung to life tenaciously although nothing could be done for him—he died on Monday.

An express was started for Fort Buchanan by way of Tucson, as the direct route was not deemed safe for two men. They reached the fort on Wednesday following. The doctor, Asst. Surgeon B. J. D. Irwin, started at once with an escort and reached Dragoon on Friday morning—the ninth day after St. John was wounded. The arm was amputated at the socket. Six days afterward, St. John got into a wagon and rode to the fort; five days later he was able to walk about, and ten days thereafter, being twenty-one days from the operation, was able to mount a horse and ride to Tucson. A remarkably quick recovery from such severe wounds. (For an account of the operation upon St. John, and his recovery, see Surgeon's report, American Journal of Medical Science, October, 1859.)

There are four graves in front of the station. The two center graves marked Ricardo, a young Mexican boy from Tucson drafted into service of the Confederate army, the other was Sargent Samuel Ford, a confederate soldier, both killed by the Apaches May 5, 1862. The two graves on either end are Hughes and Cunningham in one grave and Laing in the other. Their graves were marked at one time but the markers have long since disappeared.



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